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Report on the Fifth Elephant Conservation Group Workshop

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Background

The Elephant Conservation Group (ECG) is a network of 11 teams involved in Asian elephant conservation in range countries. It was founded in 2011 and since then the group has been working on common projects across field sites and holding meetings every one or two years. From 25. – 28. October 2016, ECG held its fifth meeting at the Vartika Adventure Retreatic Resort in Kuiburi (Kuiburi Province, Thailand). The meeting was attended by 23 participants from nine countries. ECG members that participated were from Cambodia (FFI), India (NCF and WWF), Indonesia (WWF), Malaysia (MEME), Myanmar (WWF), Nepal (Bird Life), Sri Lanka (CCR) and Thailand (WWF and ZSL). We also had guests from Thailand (National Park staff), Myanmar (FFI) and USA (WWF).

Ongoing work

In the first session each ECG member team gave a summary of their work over the last year. This way everybody was brought up to date on what is happening with the other members' elephant conservation projects.

In the second session our first two common ECG projects, where data collection has already been

completed, were discussed. It was decided to wrap up both projects and to complete drafting of publications. One of the common projects undertaken was a distribution survey, which was done in all ECG project areas based on a 25 km² grid. It was decided that each ECG member team should first publish the results for their area and after that to do a combined analysis and publication.

The second day was spent working on the current ECG projects. In one session the status of the projects, which were started a year ago, was discussed. One of the ECG team efforts is to collect information on elephant and human deaths caused by human-elephant conflict. Since it takes a while to get reasonable numbers, it was decided to collect data for another year. The other ongoing project is to collect photographs of wild elephants from which their body condition can be evaluated. Again, since elephant visibility is poor in some project areas, it was decided to collect photographs for another year, before analysis.

Role of ECG

We discussed how ECG should develop in the next couple of years. The members appreciated the following aspects of ECG: accessible, small size, real knowledge sharing, capacity building,





Field visit to Kuiburi National Park.

time for discussions, data sharing, exchange visits for training, friendship, trust, everybody is equal, opportunity to stay engaged, comfortable to ask questions and dedication.

It was decided that specific topics based on current needs should be discussed in depth at future meetings. To facilitate such discussions we will identify a specific issue for each meeting and invite experts in that field for the meeting. It was also suggested that ECG should develop policy papers and give statements on key issues. Addressing specific conservation challenges that ECG team members are facing, was also identified as a priority. A framework for fundraising for common projects was also proposed.

Human-elephant conflict

Since all ECG members are involved with human-elephant conflict mitigation, a brainstorming session was held on the topic. Members were found to be dealing with five broad aspects of human-elephant conflict: management (fencing, early warning systems, insurance), economics (cost of damage, benefits from tourism), ecology (elephant movements,



Field visit to Kaeng Krachan National Park.

translocation, food availability, behaviour, densities, drivers of human-elephant conflict), communities (engaging stakeholders, local awareness, tolerance, politics, bureaucracy) and habitat management (sustainability, corridors, park management).

Special session on Thailand and Myanmar

As the meeting was held in Kuiburi, which is near the Myanmar border, guests from Myanmar were invited and a session was held to discuss existing and possible new collaborations between the two countries.

The Thai participants discussed updating of the Action Plan for Thailand and summarized elephant conservation initiatives by other groups across Thailand. They identified the following needs for better elephant conservation in Thailand: scientific support for elephant management, create/find government champions, standards for park classification and resource allocations, better coordination, capacity building (language, scientific background), learning exchanges and sort out differences in SMART implementation.

The participants from Myanmar listed the following elephant conservation problems for Myanmar: illegal hunting, low capacity for law enforcement, lack of capacity for research, captive elephants not being registered, need for a survey of elephant trade, inconsistent law enforcement and different bodies managing different areas.

Possible future trans-boundary collaborations between Thailand and Myanmar were discussed. Stakeholders in both countries agreed on the need to have coordinated and improved law enforcement at official border crossings. More collaboration in monitoring border areas and collaboration on animals being tracked for research-which cross the border, were stated as important. Difficulties in getting the two governments engaged at such a level were discussed and it was suggested that both governments could learn from India, Nepal and Bhutan, who are working collaboratively on elephant conservation and human-elephant conflict mitigation.